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## Writing Sample

Agnes S. L. Lam

Includes "Woman to woman," "My cerebral child," "The rape of a nation," "I grew mushrooms," "April moon" and "Rendezvous with glow worms."

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**Agnes LAM****Poems****Woman to woman**

I had met them,  
got to know them

as people with offices,  
telephone extensions,  
bookshelves, tutorial chairs  
and notecards  
of scrawly handwriting.

people with husbands  
and a son or daughter,  
who goes swimming,  
takes lessons of sorts -  
pictures on Kodak paper.

We had exchanged  
smiles and greetings  
in the corridor,  
the pantry  
or over the phone.

I had lunched  
and dined with them  
at the canteen,  
the clubhouse  
and the hotel restaurant.

And then I read  
their poetry ...

lizards slithering through running sand  
trying to escape falling into caves  
subterranean rivers  
gushing through buried treasures  
the mummies are sleepy

in the early morning  
conches glisten with coral dust  
proffering the sounds from the deep  
all the barracudas have evaporated  
and the whales are expecting

a generation of orphans  
not yet menstruating walk the city  
while women in pain with first babies  
labour beneath rubble  
and the crocodiles are crying

... woman to woman

What can be said  
in the corridor  
as the cleaners pass  
or over the phone  
between classes?

Yes - that was interesting,  
wasn't it?  
the workshop -  
And how was the poetry  
competition you judged?  
I saw you on TV last night -  
Oh that - more exciting  
than the conference,  
I must say -  
there was this man  
who just kept asking questions -  
okay - talk to you later -  
I have to go -  
meeting my publisher -

Poets?

'I'm not coming home  
for dinner.'  
'It's okay.'  
The toilet bowl  
needs disinfecting,  
algae on the bath tiles  
are colonizing.  
It's time to change  
the bedsheets  
and the underwear  
has to be soaked

throughout the night.

*18 Feb 1986, Kent Ridge*

(Lam, A. (1987). Woman to woman. *Commentary*, 7(2&3), 121.)

**My cerebral child**

On the walls  
of my cerebral womb,  
you are knocking.

You scratch on my inner membrane  
as I am about to sleep,  
tickling me through my dreams,  
wanting to be fed.  
On the morning bus,  
you want to chat.  
Between classes,  
you whine for patting.  
You nudge me  
when I do laundry,  
chuckle to yourself  
during dishes  
and prattle incessantly  
as the news reel ...

Let me out,  
You are thirty.

Child of my imagination,  
what do you know  
of the wombless world?

Tonight on live TV  
the Challenger explodes  
before schoolchildren's eyes  
an earthquake in South America  
leaves babies behind  
muddied all over  
with laval debris  
from California  
two kindergarten matrons  
are charged with child abuse  
and here in Singapore  
we are talking  
of Total Defence  
midst streaming exams.

Child of my imagination,  
what have I to offer you  
beyond my uterine walls?

How should I reply  
if you should ask  
why we are eating

strawberries on vanilla  
when infants in Ethiopia  
are starved hollow  
of bone marrow?  
Should I offer you charity  
and comfort in eternity  
as an answer?  
And would you then ask -  
Why didn't you  
let me remain  
timeless from the start?

Child of my imagination,  
would it be enough  
for me to say

there in my womb  
I have loved you,  
I have hoped  
you will make this world  
more livable?

Or would you regret  
and rather be fed,  
clothed and loved  
always in my imagination,  
my cerebral home?

Tell me,  
I am thirty.

*20 February 1986, Bus 33*

(Lam, A. (1989). My cerebral child. *Westerly*, 34(4), 20-21.)

### **The rape of a nation**

Larger than life,  
they were soldiers  
in the streets of darkness,  
shadows with no faces,  
burning, raping, killing  
in a land not their own,  
a battle not of their making.

I was watching  
by the side with others.

They did not see me  
 or the other watchers.  
 But I could hear the screams,  
 smell the wet of the blood,  
 see the red of fire.

I was doing nothing.  
 Nothing was done to me.  
 But I felt the desperation of both  
 the perpetrators and the victims  
 in the rape of a nation.

Was it from another time?  
 Another space?  
 Was it just television?  
 Or a hallucination? A prophecy?  
 A fragment of collective memory?

*22 June 1997, Rodrigues Court*

(Lam, A. (2001). The rape of a nation. *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 32(1), 136.)

### **I grew mushrooms**

One afternoon I was walking  
 among the crowds  
 on Pedder Street in Central  
 and felt a sharp pain  
 on the calf of my right leg.  
 Something had hit me accidentally.

I turned around to see a man,  
 possibly South American,  
 carrying a short bamboo pole,  
 chipped at one end.  
 'I'm so sorry,' he said  
 with fear on his face.

I looked at my leg – a tiny cut.  
 'Never mind. It's just a scratch.'

'No, this is very serious.  
 The pole was dipped in  
 a culture that will not die.  
 You must see a doctor

right away, please.'

So I did. In a clinic  
on the eighth floor of a Central building,  
I waited quietly for my turn.  
The wound became itchy. I continued to wait.

An hour or so later,  
when the doctor examined my wound,  
it had sprouted tiny  
mushrooms.  
The doctor was taken by surprise but kept her calm.  
'Let's cut them off,' she said.  
And so she did.

But the mushrooms continued to grow  
on the surgical steel tray where they were placed,  
even after they were cut off from my blood.

While the doctor turned her head,  
roses sprang up from the wound instead.  
'Let's cut them off,' she said.  
And so she did.  
But the roses trimmed off from my leg became  
larger and larger, taller and taller,  
till they had to bend their heads against the ceiling.

Meanwhile, some orange tiger lilies had appeared  
from the same wound. They too were snipped off  
but continued to blossom on the doctor's desk, sprawling onto her shelves,  
covering the glass of her windows.

Then hibiscuses shot up, enormous petals spreading over the doctor's certificates, dusting  
pollen over the silver plaques from her grateful patients. After hibiscuses came tulips,  
gladioli, peonies, sunflowers, orchids, African violets (not the small potted species) ... One  
giant flower after another bloomed from my small cut, until the doctor's office became thick  
with greenery growing around us, through to the waiting area, into the elevators, crawling on  
the landings of each floor, spilling from the lobby of the building onto the streets of Central

as passengers got into red taxis with their bags of shopping  
and green trams went past with their ding ding bells

from a hundred years ago ...

*24 December 2002, Hotel New Hankyu*

(Lam, A. (2004). I grew mushrooms. *Poetry International*, 7/8, 119-120.)

## April moon

Our Chinese poet, Li Bai,  
had drunk the moon in ecstasy.  
Our fairytale had flown a maiden  
to live there long before astronauts.

Debussy recreated the dreams  
of Verlaine's birds on moonlit trees,  
the drizzle of fountains on white stone,  
*pianissimo* in night air.

Young Hemingway found nothing  
simple in Paris – not the moonlight,  
nor the breathing of someone  
resting beside you in that light.

You know all that, of course –  
nights when your moon has shone  
on a path beside a lotus pond,  
your fish soothed by michelia scent ...

But this photo you took has another tale to tell.  
This moon is not like any of the others.  
It was a moon rising over a Singapore sky  
on Children's Day at 6.20 pm in the year 2001 ...

... the sun not yet setting,  
the sky a clear blue still,  
this moon is but a film of white,  
barely visible, almost transparent,  
unassuming in daylight, yet  
with no apology for its being ...

How many times  
have we missed such a moon  
or other realities not quite  
claiming existence for themselves?

You saw it, cherished it  
enough to take its picture.

But where was I  
this Wednesday in April

when you encountered this moon  
six years, three months, twenty-four days ago?

What was I doing, thinking, feeling,



as you composed its image miles and miles away?

Surely you did not know then – nor did I –  
you would share your remembrance with me today.

If Time did not travel from the past to the present,  
if it were to move instead from the future to the past,  
then perhaps we would both know we were to meet, that one reason  
you saved your vision that evening was for me to greet this moon today ...

The Soul of the World understands destiny in *The Alchemist*.  
And the universe in *The Golden Compass* is full of intentions.  
Some have faith God holds all the days and nights of our lives,  
knows how fragments of our memories fuse into meaning

even as children chant in Cantonese about a moon pouring over the earth

on New Year's Eve as they pick untranslatable fruits, a pig's stomach,  
the hide of an ox, a whip to ride a horse, the roof beam of a house being built,  
a knife cutting greens, a round bin cover, a boat sinking, three children –  
one floating, one drowning, one hiding under a bed to eat deep fried sticks of dough

for no reason but rhyme and the easy joy of play.

27 July 2007, Rodrigues Court, on Mark Malby's "Moon 2"

(Lam, A. (2008). April moon. *Asiatic: IJUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 2(1), 119-120. Retrieved June 21, 2008 from <http://asiatic.iiu.edu.my>)

### **Rendezvous with glow worms**

Inside the Waitomo Caves,  
stalactites and stalagmites grow  
a centimetre in a century.

Water drops from ceilings of  
rock. The air is moist with darkness.  
On the black river, a boat gently

floats into a world of glow  
worms – tiny stars of soft blue light  
constellating into galaxies.

In their universe, worms are  
 born, grow into adults, shine, mate  
 for as long as seven hours, give  
 birth to a hundred babies,  
 one by one, die right after while  
 others are born and in turn enchant  
 other mates with their glimmer,  
 breed, expire within a few days –  
 an everlasting birth of light, a  
 never-ending darkness of  
 death. In this grotto is all there  
 is, all that can be, has been, will be.  
 Perhaps the worms know there are  
 other caves, other colonies  
 of their kind. Perhaps they wonder not  
 as they die before ever  
 leaving this cosmos lit by their  
 loves. In their innocence, they need not  
 yearn to travel to beyond  
 this cave, this charmed existence of  
 darkness, light, love, death, darkness, light, love ...  
 ... to another space afar  
 where stars are born, where a day is  
 as a million years, a million years,  
 a day, where angels can love  
 without mating. There is no end  
 to love, no distance, no longing, if  
 time does not exist.

*25 December 2006, Waitomo Caves, New Zealand*

(Lam, A. (2008). Rendezvous with glow worms. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 2(1), 121-122. Retrieved June 21, 2008 from <http://asiatic.iiu.edu.my>)

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